

# Roky Erickson, Texas psychedelic music legend, has died

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Legendary Texas musician Roky Erickson, who helped invent psychedelic rock in the 1960s with his band the 13th Floor Elevators, died Friday. The cause of death was not immediately known. Erickson was 71.

Mikel Erickson, Roky's brother, confirmed the news in a public Facebook post that read: "My brother Roky passed away peaceably today. Please allow us time. Music and laughter forever."

"The world lost a huge light and an incredible soul," Sumner Erickson, another brother, said by phone Friday. "It wasn't the easiest life, but he's free of all that now."

An official statement from Erickson's management confirmed that he died in Austin but did not provide details.

"Erickson had a visionary zeal rarely seen in 1965 when he co-founded the 13th Floor Elevators," the statement read. "The band's original songs, many written with lyricist Tommy Hall, coupled with Erickson's super-charged vocals and guitar, sparked the psychedelic music revolution in the mid-1960s, and led to a new role of what rock could be."

Erickson never wavered from that path, and while he faced incredible challenges at different points in his life, his courage always led him on to new musical adventures, one he continued without compromise his entire life.”

The statement also included a quote from ZZ Top’s Billy F. Gibbons, writing from the band’s European tour. Gibbons got to know Erickson in the 1960s when Gibbons was in the Houston band Moving Sidewalks, psych-music peers of the Elevators.

“Roky came to mean many things to many admirers and will continue to resonate with a legacy of remarkable style, talent, and poetic and artistic tales from beyond,” Gibbons wrote. “As a long-standing friend and follower of Roky’s amazing performing abilities and as a guitarist and singer, I can only relate the far-reaching impact he and his mates in the 13th Floor Elevators brought to the fore with their eerily magnetic psychedelic sounds.

“It’s almost unfathomable to contemplate a world without Roky Erickson. He created his own musical galaxy and early on was a true inspiration. Even now, Roky is a source of creative energy of the first order. It’s really a circumstance where he continues to provide the requisite ‘Reverberation.’ Something he predicted when he sang ‘You’re Gonna Miss Me’ — we certainly do know now that he’s at one with the universe.”

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Born on July 15, 1947, Roger Kynard Erickson grew up in Austin and attended Travis High School. He rose to prominence in the mid- and late 1960s with the 13th Floor Elevators before Struggles with drugs and schizophrenia led to stays at state hospitals. Erickson eventually resurfaced and made records on his own.

A 1990 Erickson tribute album, “Where the Pyramid Meets the Eye,” featured major acts including ZZ Top, R.E.M. and T Bone Burnett. Music industry executive Bill Bentley, who produced that album, said by phone from Los Angeles on Friday that “it’s a huge loss for rock ‘n’ roll. He changed the way I listened to music more than anybody else I’ve ever heard.”

Sumner Erickson served as his brother’s guardian from 2001 to 2007, a period covered in the 2005 Erickson documentary film “You’re Gonna Miss Me” (titled after one of Erickson’s best-known songs). “When I became guardian, the goal was to get him to a place where he didn’t need that anymore,” Sumner Erickson said.

Founded by Roky Erickson, Tommy Hall and Stacy Sutherland in 1965, the 13th Floor Elevators have often been cited as the first psychedelic rock band. Their 1966 hits “You’re Gonna Miss Me” and “Reverberation (Doubt)” arrived before the landmark 1967 “summer of love” in San Francisco, although the Elevators’ rise essentially paralleled that of Bay Area bands headed by the Grateful Dead.

A 2003 American-Statesman article by Andrea Ball recapped what happened in the late 1960s, after Erickson was arrested on marijuana charges: “He spent several years at Rusk State Hospital, which had a maximum-security unit for the criminally insane. While he was there, doctors gave him mood-stabilizing drugs and administered electroshock therapy. Roky spent the next three decades drifting between reality and insanity. During the good times, he married, had children and produced music. The bad times left him paralyzed by auditory hallucinations and paranoia.”

All the while, appreciation for Erickson's music grew. He would occasionally surface for special occasions, including the 1986 Austin Music Awards, where he joined local band the True Believers onstage. Frontman Alejandro Escovedo recalled that adventure in a public Facebook post on Friday:

"When Roky showed up for rehearsal, he had a guitar in one hand and a screwdriver in the other. We went through the songs he had chosen several times and every time we ran through the songs he would change keys. As he was leaving he turned to us with his psychedelic smile and said, 'If y'all get scared give me a call.' It was an honor to play with him; he took us to another level of improvisation."

In 2001, Sumner Erickson, who played tuba with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, became Roky's legal guardian. Moving to Pittsburgh to live with Sumner, he underwent therapy and medication regimens to address his schizophrenia.

"Slowly, Roky emerged from his emotional cocoon," Ball wrote in 2003. "Instead of retreating to the television after dinner, he talked to his brother at the table. He dined out every Thursday with friends. He played miniature golf." He also became closer to his son, Jegar, and his daughter, Cydne Shull.

In 2010, Erickson and Austin indie-rock band Okkervil River teamed up on "True Love Cast Out All Evil," Erickson's first release in more than a decade. Writer Patrick Caldwell observed in the Statesman at the time: "Producer Will Sheff distilled 60 songs written across Erickson's life down to 12 tracks sobering and eventually celebratory. Okkervil River serves as a splendid backing band, always accentuating but never overshadowing Erickson's weary, wounded voice as the Austin music legend pleads solemnly on 'Please Judge,' exorcises demons on the title track and reminds us that even in the darkest of days 'God Is Everywhere.'"

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In 2015, Austin's psychedelic music festival Levitation — named after a 13th Floor Elevators song — pulled off the rare feat of an Elevators reunion gig, a shining moment for Erickson in his hometown.

Just last month, Erickson performed the Elevators' 1967 classic album "Easter Everywhere" in its entirety. Bentley, there for the performance, said it was spectacular, but he noticed Erickson was having trouble breathing at some points during the show.

Sumner Erickson, recalling the day in 2007 that Roky was judged to no longer need guardianship, says he remembers the occasion being referred to as "the emancipation of Roky" but said that his brother thought of it as not being just about himself. "Roky would agree that if anyone was emancipated, it was both of us," he said. "He turned it into a blessing."